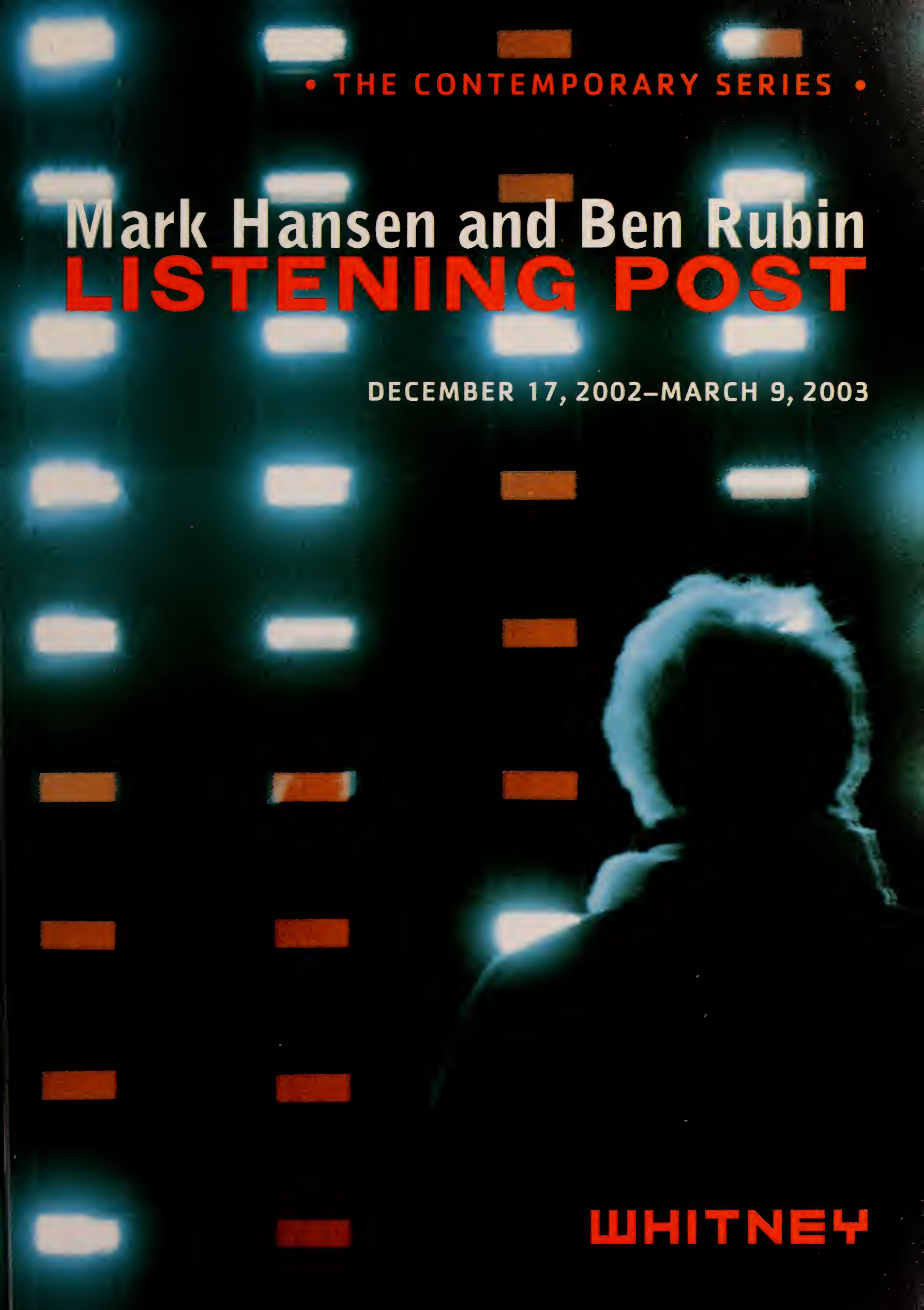
• THE CONTEMPORARY SERIES •

Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin
LISTENING POST

DECEMBER 17, 2002–MARCH 9, 2003



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Cover, pages 1, 2: Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, *Listening Post*, 2001–02 (installation view at the Brooklyn Academy of Music). Electronic components, copper wire, aluminum, eight speakers, and software, dimensions variable. Collection of the artists

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"You get used to it. I don't even see the code. All I see is blonde, brunette, redhead…" says a character in the motion picture *The Matrix*,[1] looking at a grid of screens filled with glowing streams of green code that signify another, simulacral realm. At the time of its release in 1999, the cinematic fantasy was a *Metropolis* for the turn of the millennium, reflecting the latent anxieties of a popular psyche still coming to grips with a new type of mass communications system. The movie's depiction of a cybernetic world buried within, and changing our relationship to, the physical one—and its suggestion that people might be defined as merely kinds of code—was an extrapolation of events taking place in real life. Already, software companies were devising modes of electronic surveillance to collect information on individuals' browsing habits, looking to subtly tailor services in order to maximize desirability and profits. European governments were objecting publicly to a United States government–driven online program called Echelon that they claimed was scanning the Web and stealing data for both profit- and security-minded ends. People were realizing that the windows on their computer screens might be transparent in a way that they had never imagined. They looked out upon a new world and, with an unflinchingly analytical eye, the world also looked back at them.

Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin's *Listening Post* renegotiates this dystopian scenario, although the residue of postindustrial surveillance techniques is certainly reflected in their piece. In the work, data collection software "listens" for active chat rooms and also "crawls" the Web for other sources of online conversations happening in real time. Having sampled messages from thousands of forums, news groups, and other online communication channels from around the world, *Listening Post* displays snippets of language to compose a series of "views" that highlight various aspects of the data and which may be thought of as dramatic scenes or, more dryly, core samples of the Web. To make these interactions more legible for audiences, the piece reads some of these excerpts aloud—creating a kind of call-and-response effect among the installation's eight speakers—against an ambient musical backdrop that correlates to the sifted flow of information, as the irregular staccato of the arriving messages forms the audible rhythms of the work. Hansen and Rubin liken the software that produces this temporal aspect of the work to wind chimes, currents of air replaced by those of words.[2] Sometimes passages are chosen for their common length, other times for a shared subject, word, or turn of phrase. Yet the one aspect that remains the same throughout

this perpetually unfolding process is distinctly human, commercially useless, and demographically various: Only public sites that host discussions in which people speak both freely and without mediation are included in the project. In a sense, *Listening Post* invokes the spirit of the original application of the Web, when it was employed mostly by academics around the globe engaging in the free exchange of ideas.

The words on the screens trace a linguistic flowchart of the crowd at a contemporary juncture when contact often exists, oddly, at a kind of intimate remove. People sit alone, tapping silently on keyboards—composing extended reflections or recording the jabs of daydreamed thoughts—as their words pass before the eyes of innumerable others. Seen together, the effect can seem as abstract and natural as the weather, with patterns developing among the exchanges between people like passing fronts and pressure points from morning to night. (The uniqueness and ubiquity of individuals collide and sometimes disintegrate into each other.) The daily cycle of human rhythms becomes discernable across time zones, with domestic discussions often turning up in the morning, while politics and sex dominate the channels at night. Over the course of weeks, one discerns a cultural subconscious. The currents of opinion and attention today, for example, might surround questions of war abroad, or ruminations on security issues at home, which accumulate like so many drops of rain. As animated media made sculptural, *Listening Post* sometimes locks on to a single subject, proving a textual corollary to Warhol's extended single film takes, and occasionally ruptures into nonsense, as if culture in all its diversity had been subjected to the single, uncalculated snap of a shutter before being released again into time. Such intimate correlation to massive events recalls Factory-member Lou Reed's unfulfilled desire to attune guitars to cloud cover above,[3] or, more recently, reports that Tokyo's swelling population is creating enough heat to alter weather conditions over Japan.

Listening Post, 2001–02

Yet the particular sense of macrocosmic scale invoked by *Listening Post* is available only through science. Hansen and Rubin first met at a workshop organized by the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Bell Laboratories, the research division of Lucent Technologies, which brought together artists and researchers to produce collaborative works. This sort of engagement appears in a lineage of projects beginning in the late 1960s, when Bell Laboratories first collaborated with numerous artists in the Experiments in Art and Technology program. Among noteworthy participants then was Robert Rauschenberg, and Hansen and Rubin's work bears much in common with his marriage of aestheticized chance and objective science, fine art and mass culture. *Listening Post* even keeps to Rauschenberg's idea of art as a rethinking of form and context, as the artists display their work on screens resembling those in Times Square. (In this sense, Jenny Holzer's composition of aphoristic streams of language for LED screens situated in public spheres provides another obvious precedent for the work.) However, rather than marking a cultural moment defined by the Apollo mission—which had spurred a previous generation's hybrid efforts to make art befitting developments in contemporary society at large—Hansen and Rubin's work corresponds to a world whose self-awareness has been reshaped by the Internet.

The true drama of the piece unfolds as one encounters internal separations and poetic resonance among its individual screens, such as when, amid innumerable fragments of language, a user provides a

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"Script has...become, like language, an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences," writes Walter Benjamin in "On the Mimetic Faculty."[6] Yet the philosopher reminds us of the sensuous origins of language, noting that people first "read" the stars or entrails, which, in turn, created meaning. Numerous codes may be discerned in the world around us, *Listening Post* suggests, and attempts to make the written word coincide with the tangible world span history. This recurrence itself reveals a correspondence, binding things seemingly so disparate as those rituals and phenomena described by Benjamin or Baudelaire together with those strands of text flowing before the eyes of a fictional character in a pop fantasy at the turn of the century. And this link is all the more compelling for the ways in which *Listening Post*'s ever-elusive permutations of language correspond to the work's own various nature, slipping as it does into and out of the representations of portraiture and the flows of abstraction, appearing partly as a documentary and partly as art.

—Tim Griffin

NOTES

1. *The Matrix*, Warner Bros., 1999.
2. Conversation with the artists, September 29, 2002.
3. See Victor Bockris and Gerard Malanga, *Uptight: The Velvet Underground Story* (New York: Omnibus Press, 1983), 60.
4. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 92–95.
5. Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondences," in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857, trans. Tim Griffin.
6. Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 335.

Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin in front of *Listening Post* during a work-in-progress presentation at On the Boards, Seattle, October 2002. Photograph by Rocky Salskov

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Production Credits
Engineering:
Will Pickering, Parallel Development Ltd.

Project manager:
Andrew Milmoe

Speech programming:
Igor Levine and Igor Sominskiy

Production assistance:
Robert Bethge, Jim Cantwell, Duncan Temple Lang, Jamie Mereness, Kathryn Moll, Jill Nussbaum, Stephan Von Meuhlen, Michael Wilson, and Peter Zuspan

Electronics fabrication:
C & D Assembly

Ben Rubin

Born in Boston, 1964
Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island (AB 1987)
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge (MSVS, 1989)
Lives and works in New York City

Working with sound, video, and digital electronics, Ben Rubin creates performances, installations, and architectural projects. He is a frequent collaborator with artists including Laurie Anderson, Diller + Scofidio, Arto Lindsay, Ann Hamilton, Steve Reich and Beryl Korot, and The Builders Association. Rubin has been an instructor in graduate courses at New York University and Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. He has been an invited speaker at The Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio; The University of Virginia School of Architecture, Charlottesville; The School of Visual Arts, New York; Pratt Institute, New York; "Danacas Na Cidad," Lisbon; the Gessneralle Theater, Zurich; and the International Conference on Acoustic Display. He has been awarded artistic residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta; the STEIM (Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music) Foundation, Netherlands; the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York; and Bell Laboratories, Murray Hill, New Jersey.

Selected Collaborations and Performances

2002 *Blur*, Swiss Expo 02, Yverdon, Switzerland (with Diller + Scofidio)
2001 *Listening Post*, Next Wave Festival, Brooklyn Academy of Music (with Mark Hansen)
2000 *Bar Beam*, Brasserie, New York (with Diller + Scofidio)
Electric Landscapes, Electronic Arts Performance Series, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York (with Zeena Parkins and Martha Swetzoff)
Golem, Multi-Arts Festival, Seoul, Korea (with George Lewis, David Moss, Fred Pommerehn, Richard Teitelbaum, and Carlos Zingaro)
1999 *myein*, 48th Venice Biennale, Italy (with Ann Hamilton)
1996 *Jump Cuts*, United Artists Cineplex Theater, San Jose (with Diller + Scofidio)
1995 *Not Dreaming in Public*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York (with Leni Schwendinger)

Selected Group Exhibitions

2002 *Sonic Garden: A Winter Garden Sound Installation*, World Financial Center Arts and Events Program, and Creative Time, Inc., New York
2001 *Habitats, Tectonicas, Paisajes*, Salas de Exposiciones del Ministerio de Fomento, Madrid
2000 *Cell Rules*, Creative Time, Inc., New York (with Coco McPhereson and David Pence)
Virtual Cantos, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
Volume: Bed of Sound, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York
1997 *Art in the Anchorage*, Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage, New York
1995 *Code*, Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York
1993 *The Tuning of the World*, Nickle Arts Museum, The University of Calgary, Alberta

Mark Hansen

Born in Petaluma, California, 1964
University of California, Davis (BS, 1987)
University of California, Berkeley (MA, 1991; PhD, 1994)
Lives in New York City; works in Murray Hill, New Jersey

Hansen is a member of the technical staff of the Statistics Research Department of Bell Laboratories, Lucent Technologies. He studies methods for uncovering and expressing important features in large, complex data sets. Hansen's research is interdisciplinary, inspired by various branches of applied mathematics, information theory, and recently, media arts. Hansen was the 2001 chair of the Statistical Computing Section of the American Statistical Association, and currently serves on the editorial boards of both *Technometrics* and the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*. He has authored over twenty publications and holds five patents.

Selected Recent Publications

Mark Hansen and Charles Kooperberg. "Spline Adaptation in Extended Linear Models." *Statistical Science* 17, no. 1 (2002), 2–51.

Mark Hansen and Elizabeth Shriver. "Using Navigation Data to Improve IR Functions in the Context of Web Search." Proceedings of the 2001 ACM Conference on Information and Knowledge Management, 135–42.

Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin. "The Audiences Would Be the Artists and Their Life Would Be the Arts." *IEEE Multimedia* 7, no. 2 (2000), 6–9.

Mark Hansen and Bin Yu. "Model Selection and the Principle of Minimum Description Length." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 96, no. 454 (2001), 746–74.

Rituparna Sen and Mark Hansen. "Predicting Web User's Next Access Based on Log Data." *Journal of Computational and Graphical Statistics*, forthcoming.

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